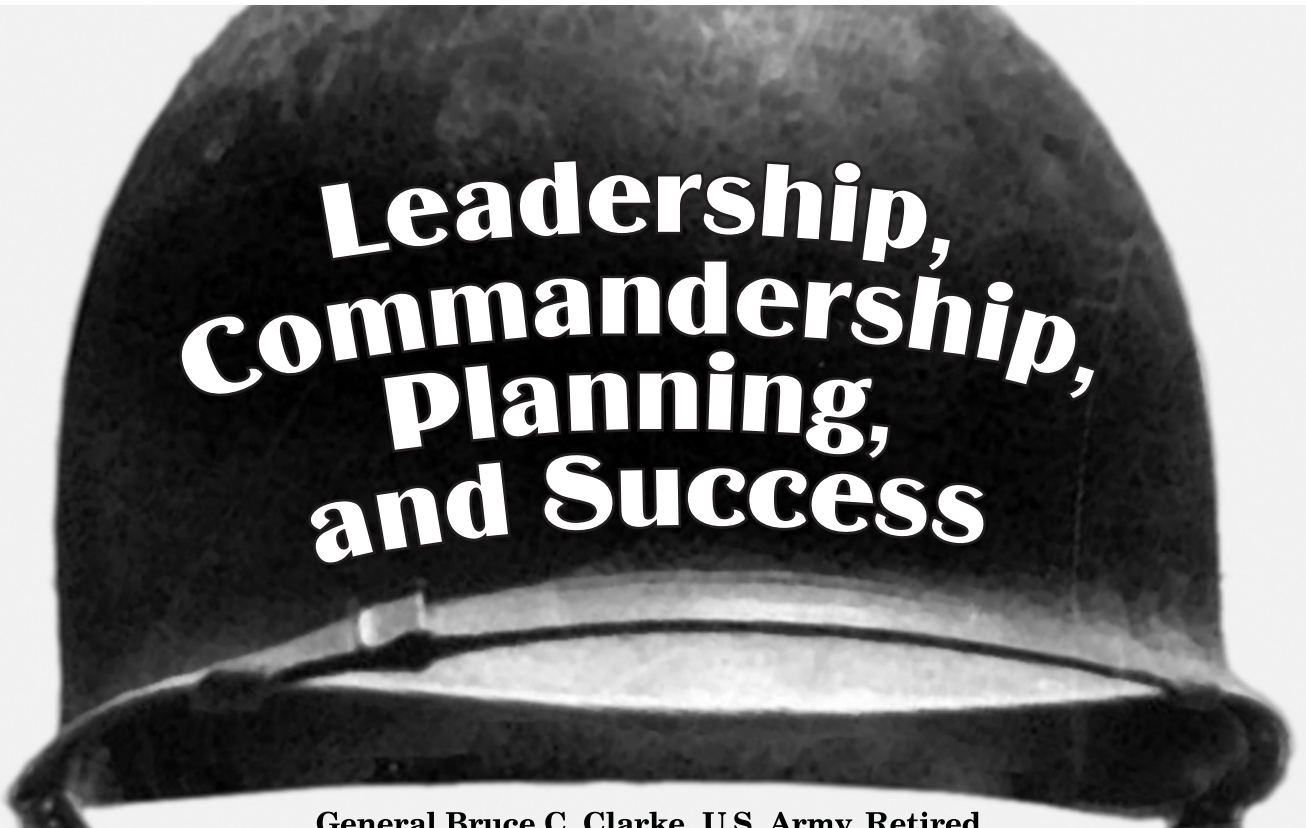

Leadership, Commandership, Planning, and Success

General Bruce C. Clarke, U.S. Army, Retired

General Bruce Clarke was one of the more successful combat commanders of World War II. In this piece, originally published in* Army Logistician *in 1982, Clarke discusses what he believes are the essential principles for planning successful offensive operations. Clarke's tenets of successful combat leadership are refreshing for their reliance on the human dimensions of combat leadership—discernment, intuition, shrewdness, and experience.

SINCE MY RETIREMENT, I have had a chance to reflect on experiences gained during my 40-year (plus) affiliation with the Army. Some years ago I surveyed, under an Army contract, the successful U.S. Army generals of World War II to determine the characteristics of outstanding commanders. Based on my experience, the survey, and my reflections, I concluded that the ability to plan with practicality and foresight is at the top of the list as most contributory to successful command. Planning ability is particularly crucial to success in conducting an offensive operation. Moreover, certain planning steps are more likely to bring success than others. These I call the principles for planning successful offensive operations. Defensive operations, where you are outnumbered, require just as meticulous plans and quick reaction as do offensive operations.

Plan Your Staff

When preparing for an offensive operation, the first thing to do is put together or coach a group of competent subordinate commanders and staff officers. Since the success of the operation will depend as much on your people as on your plan and equipment, select and coach leaders and commanders wisely. You will delegate authority to them so be careful not to select a boy to do a man's job.

There probably has been no commander who did not have blind spots. That is, there are important factors in an operation about which you are not familiar. These you must cover by relying on competent specialists. Otherwise, those blind spots might defeat your efforts.

Your command structure, like your plan, must be complete enough to get the job done but simple enough to be responsive to troop needs and changing circumstances. All branches or services need not play equal roles in the command structure of an operation. Command by committee is almost always ill advised during military operations.

How should you plan your staff? I believe the conventional chief of staff, G1, G2, G3, and G4 organization has too much staff inertia to react quickly during special tactical operations. A more effective staff structure would result from putting the G2 and G3 together into an operations sec-

tion directly under the commanding general and putting the G1 and G4 together into a logistics section directly under the chief of staff's control. When such a temporary organization was instituted during World War II, I found that the chief of staff and commanding general had no difficulties in coordinating operations. In times of crises, when there are more jobs than there are specialists, such flexibility improves the use of available personnel and enables the commander to achieve his goal more effectively. Consider this when planning your staff. Ensuring that tactics and logistics receive their due importance will help.

Make Your Plans

After you have selected and structured the staff, begin making concrete plans for operations. There are several factors to a successful plan.

Keep your plans simple. The great difference between actual combat and training for combat is the presence of real danger and great confusion. Since ancient times, writers have compared battlefield confusion to real-life pandemonium. In the presence of mass confusion, unpredictable circumstances, and often-irrational behavior, only simple and easily understood plans can succeed. Some brilliant plans are so complex that they require normal, controlled, almost classroom conditions for execution. Anticipate the more capricious conditions of actual combat when you make your plans, and keep the plans simple. Battlefield tumult makes even the simplest operations plans complex enough.

I will go one step farther. That your plans are simple and easily understood is not enough. They must be conceived, organized, and presented in a manner that no one can misunderstand them. What subordinate commanders and staff officers readily understand under normal conditions might be misunderstood or misinterpreted under the duress of battle. Anticipate this, and compensate for potential battlefield disorientation when you develop and present your plans.

Anticipate obstacles to your plans. Murphy's Law—if anything can go wrong, it will—is nowhere better illustrated than in a combat situation. Experience suggests that for every potential chance for success there are at least five potential chances for failure. Recognizing this, successful commanders make plans and preparations to circumvent obstacles. When planning alternatives, begin by listing the unchangeable factors that might adversely affect the operation. Then, project every possible tactical and logistic problem that could stem from those conditions.

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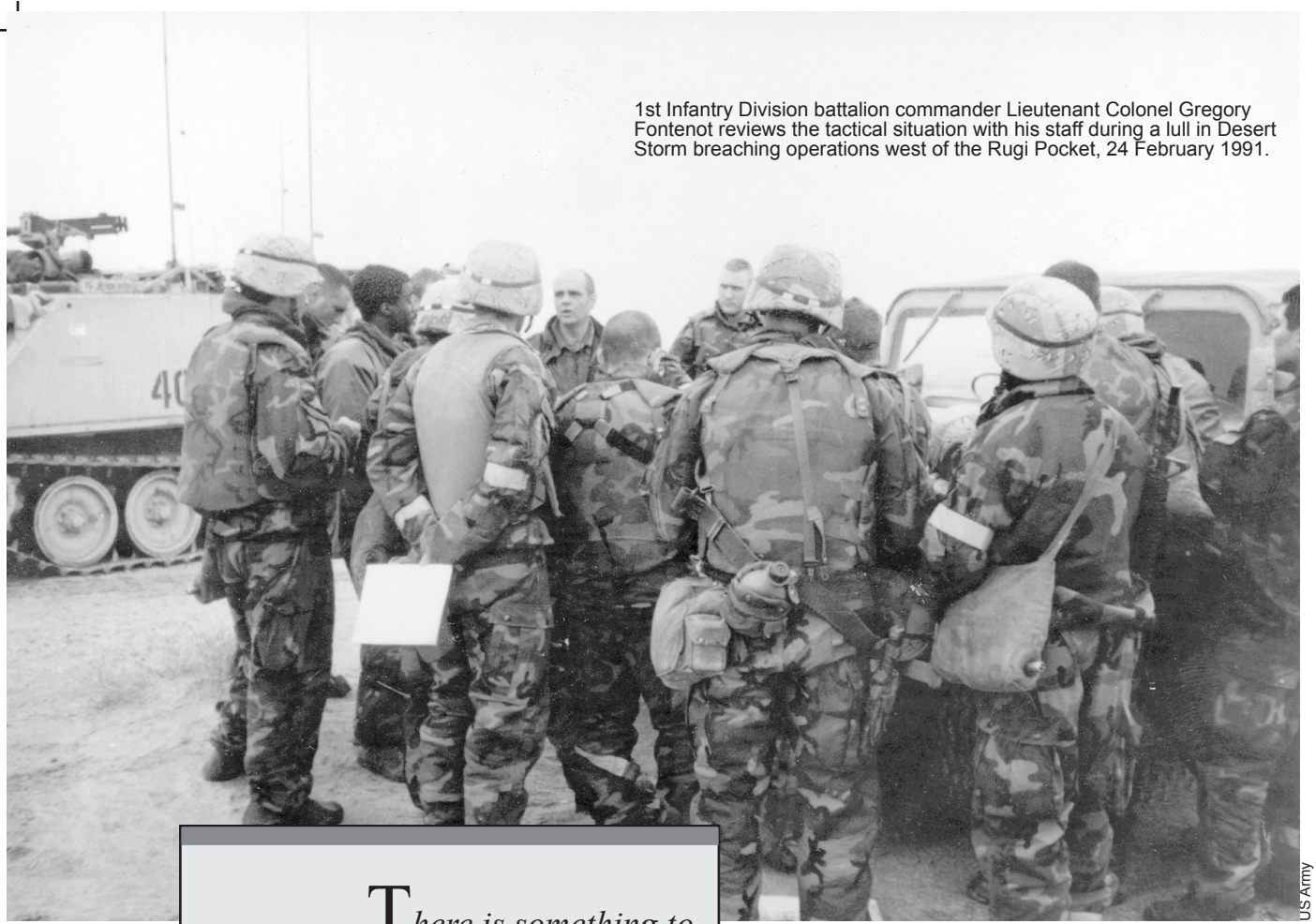
I used to keep a notebook in which I listed problems anticipated—unfortunate events that might come up. Beside these, I would annotate short descriptions of possible solutions I would try if and when I found myself confronted with the problem. Frequently, the anticipated difficulties did occur, and I was able to respond with little hesitation. My colleagues and superiors would often come up to me and say, "Clarke, you reacted quickly in that crisis!" Little did they know that the main reason I was able to react so decisively and so quickly was because I had anticipated the problem in advance and entered it and several possible solutions to it in my little black notebook.

Similarly, anticipating problems and preparing solutions will be a great aid to you during times of pressure. Success in battle requires not only violent execution but deliberate planning. If you plan thoroughly before you are confronted with a situation, you will be able to act quickly and wisely. Be sure to avoid the opposite of this axiom. Violent planning and deliberate execution can be fatal!

Of the many instances in my Army career in which I anticipated difficulties and projected so-



1st Infantry Division battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Gregory Fontenot reviews the tactical situation with his staff during a lull in Desert Storm breaching operations west of the Rugi Pocket, 24 February 1991.

US Army

There is something to be said for personally following up orders. In spite of the progress of automated command systems and the use of mission-type orders as war becomes more complex and unpredictable, the need for the commander's presence at the scene of a crisis, where he can be seen and heard, will never be eliminated.

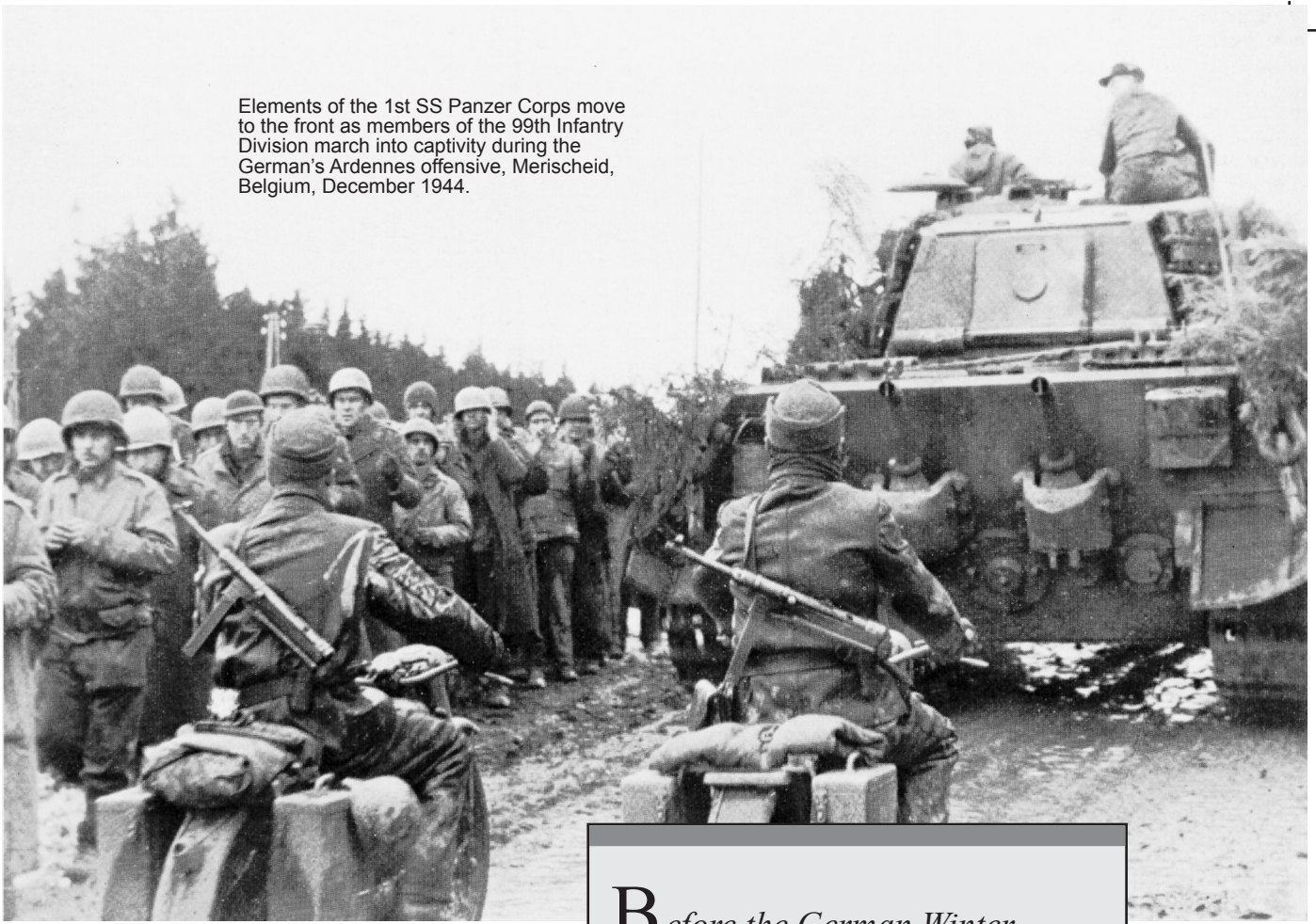
lutions, the one that first comes to mind is the liberation of the city of Nancy during World War II. As commander of the combat command that was leading General George S. Patton's Third Army across France, I had planned to take Nancy by rapidly crossing the Moselle River directly across from the city. When we arrived, we found the city too heavily defended. Having anticipated this difficulty, I turned my outfit 30 or 40 miles north, bridged the river at night, and continued east to get to the rear of the target. On the way, we attacked the city of Arracourt, destroying a German corps headquarters. Eventually, we took Nancy from the rear, largely because I had anticipated hurdles and made plans for varying situations.

Base your plan on locale. As an adjunct to my axiom about anticipated difficulties, I urge you to tailor strategic plans to specific geographical and political areas. Commanders need to identify areas of the world where action is most likely to occur well in advance of any action, then develop plans based on specific terrains, weather condition, customs, and all other factors associated with locale. Unless this is done, the Army will have neither the tactical and strategic plans nor the logistic support it needs when and where it needs it. Most of these plans require us to send a force across an ocean. This makes logistics an important consideration.

Do not make plans that are so generalized that the hypothetical operation could take place anywhere. Nor should you waste time making plans for operations in areas of the world where conflict is only remotely possible, such as with the United States.[1]

Locale should play an important role when making plans for special operations. Failure to adequately study and plan around locale was possibly one cause for the failure of the mission to rescue the hostages from Iran in 1980.[2]

Plan a balanced tooth-and-tail ratio. Much



Elements of the 1st SS Panzer Corps move to the front as members of the 99th Infantry Division march into captivity during the German's Ardennes offensive, Merischeid, Belgium, December 1944.

US Army

Before the German Winter counteroffensive of December 1944, General Manteuffel, who commanded the main effort of the German attack force, secretly assembled his troops at night over a period of weeks in a forest near the city of Pruem, where he kept them hidden. To preserve the secret of his planned action, he canceled, at the last minute, a previously scheduled artillery preparation. The net result was a surprise attack and the capture of 8,500 Americans.

has been written about the relative importance of U.S. Armed Forces tooth (fighting) and tail (logistic support) elements. Within the force limitations under which we operate, we must keep the two the combat and the supporting forces—in balance, even during offensive operations. To say that we must keep them in balance does not mean the two forces will be equal. The situation will dictate the varying balance, and it will change as the operation progresses.

We must have enough fighting forces to effectively conduct the offensive, but they will not be able to do their jobs without sufficient supporting forces, supplies, and materiel. Therefore, we must keep the tooth and tail elements in balance. Supplies, spare parts, and maintenance personnel are essential in these days of mechanical warfare.

An adequate logistics base must be established to support the mission if it is to succeed. The absence of such a logistics base prevented the tactical part of the plan to rescue the hostages in Iran from being launched.

Even during the violent-execution phase of an operation, you must not forget that logistics continues to play an important role. Logistics considerations, of paramount importance during the earliest stages of planning, continue throughout the operation and end only after the last troops have withdrawn from the area of operations.

Plan counterintelligence measures. When you are planning an offensive operation, you need to get information about the terrain and weather of the combat site. You also need to learn about the enemy and what he is planning to accomplish. Such information is often hard to get, since the enemy might have good counterintelligence plans. A lesson about effective counterintelligence can be found in

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another incident from World War II history.

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Manteuffel's plan contained all the desired elements of effective counterintelligence secrecy: cover, concealment, diversion, and deceit, all of which are designed to block or confuse the enemy's intelligence-gathering sources. Manteuffel's plans and counterintelligence measures should be carefully studied by every commander planning offensive operations or planning to defend NATO in case of attack.

Commanders also should study American Revolutionary War General George Washington's method in planning the offensive across the Delaware River to capture Trenton [New Jersey], at a critical time in the war. To avoid potential leaks of information, Washington and only two or three staff members planned the operation in secrecy some distance from his Valley Forge headquarters. Major General Lord Stirling, one of the planners, assembled in secrecy, the boats that would be used in the operation.

Not until time was ripe for the operation did Washington inform the rest of the Army about the plan. At 4 p.m. on Christmas Day 1776, he directed his troops to form for a parade, each person carrying one day's ration. Washington called his commanders forward, front and center, and gave them orders to move their units to the embarkation sites, where the troops entered the boats to cross the Delaware River. At that time they were briefed. The success at Trenton that Christmas night can be attributed greatly to effective counterintelligence measures.

Train Adequately

Even the most deliberate concepts need to be tested and perfected through training. Every successful commander knows that soldiers perform in combat no better than they have been taught and practiced in training. Prior training as a whole team is essential for mission success. Practice improves performance, but only *perfect* practice can make a perfect performance.

Training must be as realistic as possible, with unrealistic aspects eliminated. Such training must reflect as many of the conditions of the battlefield as ingenuity can conceive and safety rules will permit. I attribute many successes of World War II, including some of my own, to the fact that I had insisted on intensive training in darkness—frequently at 0400—and under adverse weather conditions.

Training develops good combat soldiers, and it lets you know what you can count on from your command in a crisis. As you detect special strengths in training, use them to perfect your plan.

Issue Orders

Once you have selected and coached your staff, made your plans, and trained your units, you are ready to set those plans into action. To do so, obviously you must issue orders. The question is what sort of orders should you give?

To make optimum use of people, weapons, and materiel, you must issue orders that are clear and flexible enough to work in rapidly changing situations. Consequently, you should give subordinates a broad picture of the general mission of your command in addition to giving them specific orders. Those who served in World War II, especially those of us who were in armored divisions, learned from experience the importance of mission-type orders.

Basically, a mission-type order states what you want accomplished, points out the controlling factors that must be observed, and describes the

available resources you can count on. A mission-type order is brief, general, and nonrestrictive rather than voluminous, detailed, and restrictive. Such orders allow competent subordinate commanders to exercise imitative, resourcefulness, and imagination in carrying out the mission. Patton was a master in using mission-type orders.

Follow Up on Your Orders

Once you make your plans and issue orders to your subordinate commanders, rely on them to use initiative and good judgment in carrying out the orders, but do not assume that your directives have been 100 percent understood. Even the simplest plans and best-worded orders can be misinterpreted. The English language is not technically exact enough to prevent misinterpretation. Therefore, follow up and make sure that nothing has been misunderstood before action begins. Only then can you be sure every commander knows exactly what he is to do and when and how he is to do it.

There is something else to be said for personally following up orders. In spite of the progress of automated command systems and the use of mission-type orders as war becomes more complex and unpredictable, the need for the commander's presence at the scene of a crisis, where he can be seen and heard, will never be eliminated.

The Safety, or Risk, Factor

Throughout our Army careers, we are taught and teach that a safety factor is a part of any plan. In combat, the factor of safety in planning should be as adequate and duly influenced by the importance of the success of the mission as the resources available to you will allow. Risk is inherent in any military operation, but it should not become foolhardiness. Failure to take reasonable risks, which leads to inaction, has caused many commanders to be replaced.

The Hammelburg, Germany, rescue attempt in March 1945, in which a small task force of approximately 300 officers and men from the 4th Armored Division was sent under great odds to rescue U.S. prisoners from a prisoner-of-war camp, is an example of a mission in which the safety factor was underemphasized in light of the significance of the mission. Not only was the camp 35 miles beyond U.S. forward elements, but also the small U.S. force was setting out against unknown enemy forces, which proved to be far superior in number and capabilities. Only 15 members of the task force returned. Not one of the prisoners was rescued. In execution, the risk proved too great.

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The successful commander of military operations in any future war, as in past wars, must weigh the mission, resources, obstacles, and other factors and come up with a flexible, balanced, effective plan of operations. I have closely observed commanding officers and commanding generals during World War II and the Korean war. Some were promoted, some were relieved, and some just hung on until the armistice. What one thing separated them? It was the extent to which they could constantly juggle the many factors involved in command without dropping any important ones. In 1951, U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur said it better and in fewer words: "There is no substitute for victory." ***MR***

General Bruce C. Clarke, U.S. Army, Retired, commissioned through the U.S. Military Academy in 1925, established an outstanding combat record during World War II as combat commander, 4th and 7th Armored Divisions. Subsequently, he served in progressively more responsible positions, including commanding general, I Corps, in Korea; commanding general, U.S. Army, Pacific; commanding general, 7th U.S. Army, in Europe; and commanding general, Continental Army Command. He was commander-in-chief of U.S. Army, Europe, and commander of the Central Army Group, NATO, when he retired in 1962. This article is adapted from Clarke's original article by the same name that was published in Army Logistician *(May-June 1981).*